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Climate Change as Chronic Crisis in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

STEPHANIE BERNHARD

Part I: Chronic Crisis

What constitutes a crisis, and is the concept of crisis useful for understanding climate change? Historically imagined as a short-term problem with a conclusive ending, crisis at first seems unsuited for describing millennia-long shifts in the global climate. But on a geological scale of billions of years, the brief period in which humans are causing carbon emissions to spike may eventually appear as a momentary disturbance—a crisis. These questions about the place of crisis in the narrativization of deep time arise from recent provocations about the capacity of fiction to represent climate change and from a fresh reckoning with Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses," in which the historian argues that people need a new way of thinking about the history of the human species in an era of anthropogenic climate change.¹ Scholarly interest in the deep history of our species has spiked since the naming of the Anthropocene, the new geological era barreling toward full recognition in the sciences though still competing with alternative narratives of environmental impact caused by (some) humans in the humanities.² In this essay, I develop the concept of chronic crisis, a period of jarring transition lasting longer than a human life, to describe how climate change manufactures crisis, shapes contemporary consciousness, and reframes our understanding of our species history. I then read Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04* as an early example of a text narrated by a protagonist living in chronic crisis as a result of his own climate change awareness; in it, the narrator reinvents crisis mode by pairing classic stream-of-consciousness techniques, including

repetition, with scenes of hurricanes presented as chronic events and musings on the place of human history in deep time.

A decade after its publication, it is possible to read “Four Theses” both as an example of contemporary scholarship deconstructing the Anthropocene and as a primary text about species history, among the first of an avalanche of calls for further study into the deep past of *Homo sapiens* as we consider an Anthropocenic future in which we can no longer ignore the long-term impact of our species’ actions on our surroundings.³ Reading Chakrabarty as a species historian reveals an interesting pattern in his vocabulary—he uses the word *crisis* twenty-seven times to describe anthropogenic climate change. Chakrabarty does not analyze *crisis* the way he does a newer term like *Anthropocene*. For him, *crisis* serves as a utilitarian placeholder rather than as a concept in need of careful consideration or redefinition. Chakrabarty refers to climate change repeatedly as a “planetary crisis,” situating the phenomenon broadly in space; he also calls climate change the “contemporary crisis” and the “current crisis,” situating global warming in the present day—a narrow frame given the ambitious parameters of his historical argument.⁴ His use of the word challenges the way we define the concept today in contrast to the way it was defined in the recent and distant past and shows that we can use *crisis* to understand our position as a short-lived, high-impact species in a long geological history.

The word *crisis* has been associated with an ultimate idea of “current” or “contemporary” for most of its etymological history. *Crisis* comes to us unaltered from its Latin spelling. In that language, and in ancient Greek, it means “decision” or “discrimination.”⁵ *Crisis* entered the English language in the sixteenth century as a medical term, signifying the acute turning point in a disease when it becomes clear whether the patient will recover or die—the moment of decision or judgment in the progress of an illness. This medical concept of crisis remained dominant for several centuries, as for example in the Emily Dickinson poem “’Twas Crisis—All the length had passed,” which shows crisis as the judgment of an instant in time:

’Twas Crisis—All the length had passed—
That dull—benumbing time
There is in Fever or Event—
And now the Chance had come—

The instant holding in its claw
The privilege to live
Or warrant to report the Soul
The other side the Grave.

The Muscles grappled as with leads
That would not let the Will—
The Spirit shook the Adamant—
But could not make it feel.

The Second poised—debated—shot—
Another had begun—
And simultaneously, a Soul
Escaped the House unseen—⁶

Dickinson figures crisis as “The instant holding in its claw / The privilege to live / Or warrant to report the Soul / The other side the Grave.” The crisis, for Dickinson, is the patient’s “chance,” the literal “instant,” the work of a mere “second.” It passes, and its consequences, the “privilege to live” or not, are felt immediately. In the narrative of this poem, the result of the crisis is the death of the sick person. A “soul” must report to “the other side the Grave.” Before the moment of crisis, which is itself almost immeasurably brief, the world of the poem looks one way; in the instant of crisis, everything changes; and afterward, a new long-term reality settles into the house. The moment of crisis is a turning point and a decision—it disrupts the status quo, allows a “soul” to fight for the return to normalcy, and in this case denies the possibility of return.

Of particular interest is Dickinson’s line “The Muscles grappled as with leads,” which connects the concept of crisis to the physiology of the human body. One imagines a body tensed with effort, adrenaline coursing through veins, trying desperately to get through the worst of the battle and then relaxing the clenched muscles in the comfort of victory or slump of death. The definition of *crisis* has evolved in the last century to include longer-term emergencies like “the financial crisis” or “the energy crisis,” which can last years. The sense of crisis as occurring and resolving in an instant has faded. Still, we imagine crisis as a disturbance that we must either survive or to which we must succumb. Crisis retains the connotation of the grappling muscle, the acute bat-

tle, the temporary problem that requires an intense surge of strength to overcome. A crisis lasts as long as an entity can maintain the literal or figurative rush of adrenaline required to sustain radically elevated levels of effort. As Eric Cazdyn argues in *The Already Dead* (2012), that period may well be lengthening into “the new chronic” with the advances of medical technologies, which can turn bodily crises into chronic illnesses, and with the persistence of a global capitalism designed not to uplift people but to maintain and manage perpetual poverty for the vast majority.⁷

In recent years—as in Chakrabarty’s “Climate of History”—the term *crisis* has stretched even further to accommodate anthropogenic climate change, a phenomenon that humans cannot solve in the amount of time that we can clench our muscles in a single effort. Climate scientists tell us that climate change will outlast anyone currently living—it extends beyond our “contemporary” or “current” moment into a future in which the only certainty is that the planet faces centuries of anthropogenic climatic disruption, even if carbon emissions halt tomorrow. Anthropologists such as Henrik Vigh now argue that we need to begin thinking of crisis as an ongoing state in zones of chronic poverty and conflict; in the Anthropocene, this concept extends, unequally, to all living beings.⁸ The idea of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch exceeds the spatial and temporal scale of any individual human. No being living now will “survive” the crisis of climate change and witness a return to a past epoch—not even those fortunate enough to avoid the devastation from hurricanes, heat waves, drought, famine, and sea level rise already plaguing the world through which billions of humans are already suffering. If climate change is a crisis, it does not act like one from the perspective of the individual. For us, this storm will never be over; the fever will not abate.

Rather than wait for the sickness to end, rather than seek an ultimate solution to the problem of climate change, we need to learn how to live in crisis, how to spend the decades of our lives in a turning point, in a moment of ever-evolving decisions—decisions we make, decisions we do not make, decisions enforced by others.⁹ This is not easy. The continual flow of effort such chronic attention requires is at odds with our physiology, which evolved to accommodate short bursts of energy and stretches of relaxation—the fight-or-flight response tuned to acute crisis. The belief that one must either conquer climate change instantly

or perish leads to nihilism and despair, exemplified by books like Roy Scranton's glum nonfiction *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*.¹⁰

In fiction, the fight-or-flight instinct spawns the apocalypse fantasy that has thus far dominated cli-fi. These speculative, dystopian novels decline to imagine crisis as chronic, appeasing human fear instead with an old-fashioned acute crisis in the form of flood or drought that demolishes the status quo and replaces it with something worse. Environmental apocalypse is a particularly limited paradigm for groups who have suffered the ravages of colonialism and imperialism for several centuries, as Kyle Powys Whyte demonstrates. In "Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene," Whyte shows that the conditions frequently imagined as postapocalyptic by white cli-fi novelists emerged several hundred years ago for Indigenous peoples. Yet Indigenous cultures and societies continue to exist under apocalypse conditions, just as some population of humanity will live through climate change conditions.¹¹ Living humans may have more agency to persist—and to affect the course of the crisis—than the nihilistic apocalyptic response allows.

We must develop a plan for living our entire lives in a state of what I call chronic crisis, an intentionally oxymoronic term that contains both "crisis," with its connotations of acuteness, speed, and short duration, and "chronic," another time word with a long medical history that implies slow-moving problems or illnesses "lasting a long time, long-continued, lingering."¹² If, as Chakrabarty and others are rightly claiming, we need to start understanding ourselves in the context of species and planetary history of many millennia, then it is necessary to understand climate change both as endlessly chronic and also as an instantaneous crisis. We have long used graphs, models, and metaphors to demonstrate the infinitesimally tiny place that humans occupy in the history of the earth, such as the history of the earth condensed into a single calendar year made famous by Carl Sagan in *Dragons of Eden*.¹³ In this narrative, after nearly twelve "months" of the rise and fall of prehistoric species, dinosaurs occupy the planet from around Christmas Eve to December 29, and the first hominids evolve on the evening of December 31. What we think of as human history, from the invention of agriculture up through the present day, takes place within the very last minute of the year; the fossil fuel era fills just the last two seconds. In this geological context, anthropogenic climate change and the associated Anthropocene epoch are crises in the traditional sense—whatever

forces that we humans unleash on the planet will be felt for a very short time, and after we have vanished, the planet will move toward a new status quo. On the other hand, that two-second instant containing our entire industrialized, electrified, colonized, nuclear, globalizing, digitizing history encompasses the life spans of every person currently breathing, currently deciding when to grapple our muscles and when to relax. Climate change, the crisis that appears instantaneous from a geological perspective spanning millions of years, is chronic from a human perspective. Once we recognize these scalar distinctions, our challenge is to figure out how to live with them.¹⁴

In comparison to these geological concerns, Rob Nixon's claim that human bias toward acute and immediate emergencies prevents us from understanding long-term environmental damage to marginalized communities seems almost humble, grounded in the history of the mere nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, he makes the same type of argument as Chakrabarty and Timothy Morton, demonstrating through history and literature how difficult it is for humans to comprehend events that last longer than we can clench our muscles, longer than the duration of a traditional crisis.¹⁵ Consider the semantic connection between the terms *slow violence* and *chronic crisis*: each identifies a slowing or lengthening of the time frame of a negatively charged environmental event or circumstance. Nixon identifies instances of environmental violence from the recent past, the "slowness" of which renders them invisible to the casual observer. Building on his approach, chronic crisis imagines the climate present and future. How do, can, should, will humans respond to a lifetime of inevitable environmental collapse, extinctions, and serial minicrises like storms and droughts and floods that together constitute the chronic crisis? How can art, literature, and culture participate in this response by representing the new modes of thought that are developing in a climate-changed world?

Partially for reasons that Nixon outlined, I can hardly provide a comprehensive answer to the first question here. Humans will respond differently to climate change depending on whether we live in the Maldives or Miami, whether we are poor or wealthy, whether we wield power or are overpowered. The work of mitigating climate belongs to many thousands of voices and perspectives. But with regard to the second question, on literature, I argue that contemporary fiction

might be uniquely capable of representing climate change as humans encounter it, not just in moments of acute disaster, but also in our daily lives and long-term consciousness—as chronic crisis. To make this claim, I outline some of the concerns that Ghosh articulates in *The Great Derangement*, which includes an exhaustive list of reasons why few works of literary fiction have thus far addressed climate change head-on.¹⁶ I read Ben Lerner’s novel *10:04* through Ghosh’s critique, showing how Lerner already addresses Ghosh’s concerns and arguing that Lerner writes *against* Ghosh’s claims about the best ways to represent climate change.

Part II: Chronic Crisis in Ben Lerner’s *10:04*

In the linked essays of *The Great Derangement*, novelist Amitav Ghosh asks why few nonspeculative novels have adequately addressed climate change—his own included.¹⁷ Before turning to Lerner’s text, a nonspeculative novel that addresses climate change, I will explain a few of the problems Ghosh perceives. Then I will show how Lerner manages these representational hurdles by developing a new narrative voice for representing chronic crisis.

First, Ghosh claims that modern nonspeculative fiction is distinct from science fiction and the epic in its rejection of “improbability” in plot; Ghosh says that this is because “probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience.”¹⁸ The novel arose in Europe alongside a burgeoning middle class that wanted confirmation of its own stability and self-portraits of its own civility, not fantastic tales from far-off times and places. He quotes Franco Moretti in saying that novels “offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life . . . turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all.”¹⁹ The problem Ghosh underscores is that living with climate change includes surprises, adventures, perhaps a few miracles, and many disasters: “The age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability.”²⁰ It is a special challenge to write about unusual events when a primary accepted purpose of the “literary” or “serious” novel is to show readers something true about the

realities of everyday life, though some, like Jesmyn Ward's representation of Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* (2011), have risen to this challenge—in her case by pairing the unpredictability of living in poverty (not bourgeois comfort) with the destabilizing force of the storm.²¹

In his emphasis on individual weather events like tidal waves, hurricanes, and tornadoes, however, Ghosh does not account for the fact that climate change takes many forms and that people experience its unfolding gradually. We encounter climate change as an increase in the severity of storms and heat waves, but we also encounter it when the floodwater recedes and the temperature drops from deadly to unusually warm. Fiction of everyday life (bourgeois and not) must therefore play a role in the representation of climate change, even when it does not include the narration of a catastrophic weather event; as Sarah Dimick argues, daily observations of slight seasonal shifts can prove as powerfully disruptive in narrative as typhoons.²² That sense of the everyday “uncanny” of climate change (Ghosh's word) is undeniably difficult to convey, which is perhaps why few nonspeculative novelists have suffused their prose with it. Unless their lives or livelihoods are fundamentally bound to the facts of climate change (residents of flooded neighborhoods, scientists, NGO workers), few people think about climate change daily. For novelists who want to represent human consciousness *and* the worsening problem of climate change, this fact presents a conundrum: one cannot write both about climate change *and* about the way people actually think. Barbara Kingsolver tries to solve this problem in *Flight Behavior* by creating a primary character who is a scientist and attempts to teach other characters its basic facts, thus incorporating “realistic” professional involvement with science into the plot.²³ But many humans do not yet engage directly with climate issues on a professional or personal basis in our daily lives; thus Ben Lerner's approach in *10:04*, which describes how climate change appears in the mind of a layperson, fills an important gap in climate literature.²⁴

Lerner also addresses Ghosh's concern that the contemporary realist novel cannot represent climate change because it prioritizes the individual rather than a species-oriented conception of humanity: “The contemporary novel has become ever more radically centered on the individual psyche while the collective—‘men in the aggregate’—has receded, both in the cultural and the fictional imagination.”²⁵ Because addressing climate change involves convincing humans to consider the

interests of the collective both *as* their own and *alongside* their own, Ghosh argues that the individual-oriented novel might prove a hindrance. But Lerner shows that the individual and aggregate perspectives need not be seen as polar opposites. Ghosh claims that the “earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities,” and the individual and the collective may themselves be points on a spectrum rather than two sides of a coin.²⁶ Perception of climate change may begin with an individual observation and proceed to collective consciousness, or vice versa.

To prove that climate change seldom merits the attention of the literary elite, Ghosh claims that “we need only glance through the pages of a few highly regarded literary journals and book reviews, for example, the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Literary Journal*, and the *New York Times Review of Books*” to see that climate nonfiction receives representation but that climate “novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon.”²⁷ Yet all the publications that Ghosh names reviewed *10:04*, which features a cover image of the New York City skyline ominously blackened after Hurricane Sandy.²⁸ Lerner has received such laurels as a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Fulbright; his published works have won or been finalists for many of the nation’s most prestigious literary awards. He is precisely the type of climate writer whose works should be receiving more ample recognition from the literary establishment, according to Ghosh—yet it is hard to imagine how much more loudly Lerner could be applauded. Rather than dismiss Lerner as the exception who proves the rule, it is worth considering how he managed to garner critical admiration while writing about a topic that few “serious” nonspeculative novelists dare to broach. I think there are several reasons why Lerner’s novel appeases the literary gatekeepers while addressing climate change seriously: it includes precisely the type of disaster that Ghosh claims is too often absent in fiction *and* the moments of quotidian climate anxiety between disasters; it demonstrates the uneven effects of climate change on global populations over a long history; and it fixates on the very problem of individualism Ghosh claims is the downfall of modern fiction. Lerner consistently treats climate change as a chronic crisis for society and himself.

“Unseasonable Warmth”

The literary establishment accepts Lerner, in part, because his corpus does not focus exclusively on climate change or environmental issues, which means he has avoided both the cli-fi and the ecopoet categorizations. Even *10:04* is not a novel *about* climate change, per se. Climate change and its attendant disasters function, rather, as one of many threads of anxiety that weave through the mind of the narrator, who, like the author, is called Ben and is a writer living in Brooklyn. Other threads include death, parenthood, art, money, capitalism, class, and the narrator’s newly discovered, potentially deadly chronic illness, the lurking threat of which bothers Ben in the same way that climate change does. The novel follows Ben’s thoughts on his walks, dinners, working hours, and conversations over the period of a year or so, mostly in New York City. In other words, *10:04* is a novel about the cerebral texture of everyday life for a wealthy, successful white man living in a developed country in the early twenty-first century. It should be insufferable, and sometimes it is. But Lerner’s pretension is balanced by astute psychological realism; seldom are novelists capable of showing just how many thoughts the human mind can hold simultaneously—connected thoughts, random thoughts, thoughts that seem as though they should connect although the link remains obscure.

From the opening sentence of the novel, climate change emerges as a leading concern in the narrator’s mind: “The city had converted an elevated length of abandoned railway spur into an aerial greenway and the agent and I were walking south along it in the unseasonable warmth after an outrageously expensive celebratory meal in Chelsea that included baby octopuses the chef had literally massaged to death.”²⁹ This sentence contains several clauses that could be examined from an environmental perspective. The city, New York, is reinventing its own urban ruins into an “aerial greenway” known as the High Line; the narrator and his agent have just eaten a meal that includes “baby octopuses,” probably endangered and definitely pulled from a polluted sea (a concern to which Lerner returns later in the novel). In the case of both railway spur and octopus, the narrator highlights the origins of our modern luxuries—how the ruins were made green and living again (interestingly, with the city as the agent of this change) and how the sea creatures met their end through the gentlest of touches.

Most significant in terms of climate change is the observation of “unseasonable warmth.” On its own, this modest mention of unusual temperature might not draw attention to itself, but Lerner repeats the observation frequently, in identical or similar wording, throughout the novel. A December afternoon is “unseasonably warm,” and in October the “unusual heat felt summery.”³⁰ The warmth even follows the narrator out of New York to a writing residency in the Texas desert, a region about which he knows nothing, where the “thin winter air was cool but unseasonably warm; it was probably in the forties.”³¹ Should the reader imagine that the narrator has researched average nighttime winter temperatures in Texas and is reporting the “unseasonable” warmth as fact? It happens that average nightly lows in the winter in Marfa, Texas, are in the twenties, but this fact matters less than the observation that the narrator is always *thinking* about unseasonable warmth.³² Whether at home in New York or visiting a new place for the first time, the threat of climate change follows him just as closely as his fears about a possible fatal illness lurking in his body. Lerner does represent feelings of fear in moments of acute catastrophe—those scenes that Ghosh thinks should be proliferating in contemporary literature as the climate gets wilder—but he also shows the subtle striations of the anxiety of chronic crisis, which stains calm moments with awareness of lifelong disaster.

Ben’s chronic climate anxieties constantly inflect his awareness of his placement in various types of time. Like most contemporary novels, as Ghosh points out, *10:04* is situated primarily in a narrow slice of the contemporary moment, covering a short span in the life of one person writing about the time and place in which he is living. Though Lerner does not attempt to narrate a deep geological, species, or historical past outside the consciousness of his narrator, he incorporates them into the text by narrating Ben’s experience of trying—sometimes failing—to come to terms with the enormity of temporal scale. While in Marfa, for example, Ben visits an exhibit of oversized, reflective boxes created by the twentieth-century American minimalist artist Donald Judd and finds that art that seemed sterile in a New York gallery setting takes on new resonance in the Texas desert with the landscape always visible:

The work was set in time, changing quickly because the light was changing, the dry grasses going gold in it, and soon the sky was beginning to turn orange, tingeing the aluminum. All those win-

dows opening onto the open land, the reflective surfaces, the differently articulated interiors, some of which seemed to contain a blurry image of the landscape within them—all combined to collapse my sense of inside and outside, a power the work had never had for me in the white-cube galleries of New York. At one point I detected a moving blur on the surface of a box and I turned to the windows to see two pronghorn antelope rushing across the desert plain.

. . . The work was located in the immediate, physical present, registering fluctuations of presence and light, and located in the surpassing disasters of modern times . . . but it was also tuned to an inhuman, geological duration, lava flows and sills, aluminum expanding as the planet warms. As the boxes crimsoned and darkened with the sunset, I felt all those orders of temporality—the biological, the historical, the geological—combine and interfere and then dissolve.³³

In this excerpt from a long ekphrasis, Lerner addresses two of Ghosh's primary concerns about the capacity of the contemporary "serious" novel to address climate change and environmental or nonhuman issues in general. First, a concern not mentioned at length above, Ghosh reminds us, through Latour, that "one of the originary impulses of modernity is the project of 'partitioning,' or deepening the imaginary gulf between nature and culture: the former comes to be relegated exclusively to the sciences and is regarded as being off-limits to the latter."³⁴ This impulse to partition and categorize, Ghosh claims, led to the separation of science fiction from literary fiction, because the former dares to traffic in, well, science and, by extension, nature, whereas literary fiction supposedly stays firmly rooted in the human realm of culture. Yet in Lerner's prose, we see the literary novel reconciling nature and culture by showing how the nonhuman environment shapes and participates in a product of human culture: light changing, antelope running, "inside and outside" (i.e., the human-built room and the landscape dominated by nonhuman species) dissolving into one sheer presence.

Second, Lerner writes that the work is "set in time" due to the capacity of the boxes to reflect the shifting light of the sun through large windows. The type of time here must not be of the type that we measure on watch faces or computer screens but rather time made visible and

sensate by the movement of the sun, which operates on a different scale from human time—again, without actually narrating a deep past or an imagined future, he brings the idea of both into a scene of the “immediate, physical present.” Ghosh asks, “Is it the case that science fiction is better equipped to address the Anthropocene than mainstream literary fiction?” He suspects that it is not, for “cli-fi is made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future, and that, to me, is exactly the rub. The future is but one aspect of the Anthropocene: this era also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present.”³⁵ Fiction must address the future, the present, the recent past, and, I would add, the deep past—the Anthropocene requires us to think in all these time frames. Lerner asks readers to do just this. The Judd exhibit exists in the present, “but it was also tuned to an inhuman, geological duration,” extending beyond our understanding of a present moment, though acknowledging our human impact on the climate through the image of aluminum expanding “as the planet warms.” Finally, the narrator feels “all those orders of temporality—the biological, the historical, the geological—combine and interfere and then dissolve.” Lerner is teaching us how to live in chronic crisis—to hold in our minds the idea of a life span, the duration of a nation or even species, and an epoch simultaneously—and to understand where those massively different timescales intersect and diverge. He asks readers to remember that in our art, our bodies, and our politics, we must acknowledge that we participate in many different types of time as we consider how to use the rest of the time allotted to us.

Lerner’s investment in deep time manifests in other diegetic scenes, too, serving always to demand that the reader reconsider her own position in history, half contradicting Ghosh’s claim that “the *longue durée* is not the territory of the novel.”³⁶ In one scene, for example, the narrator takes his young mentee, Roberto, on a day trip to the American Museum of Natural History, where “a circuitous path leading through several museum buildings allows the visitor to trace the evolution of vertebrates, a walkable cladogram with alcoves on either side of the path displaying fossils of species that shared physical characteristics—e.g., ‘four limbs with movable joints surrounded by muscle’ (tetrapods).”³⁷ Lerner selects a place where his characters can literally walk through the history of life on earth, enacting a version of the Sagan model of Earth’s history. Ben and Roberto witness the development of vertebrates, the

long reign of the dinosaurs, the evolution of mammals, and finally the “at once dated and futuristic” “dioramas of Pacific People and Plains Indians” and the “strangely empty Hall of African peoples.”³⁸ Through the aegis of a museum, the novel takes us on a journey through deep time and our own species history without leaving the present day. The trip concludes with a nod to the future at the gift shop:

I bought him a sixty-dollar *T-rex* puzzle because I would make strong six figures and the city would soon be underwater. . . . I also purchased a couple of packets of astronaut ice cream, which Roberto had never tried.

We ate the freeze-dried Neapolitan stuff—a food from the future of the past, taken to space only once on *Apollo 7*, 1968—on a bench in front of the museum. It was an unseasonably warm day and the bizarreness and novelty of the food cracked Roberto up, restored his spirits.³⁹

Sentences like the first one quoted above—which veers paratactically from the mundane, material puzzle and money to the abstract, nihilistic image of future climate apocalypse—pervade the novel and provide a precise account of everyday life with the knowledge of climate change in the early twenty-first century. Lerner is narrating the mind in chronic crisis, an ongoing awareness that we are living in an era of unending climate precarity—not an era in which every moment *is* an apocalyptic disaster but one in which every moment *could* be a disaster. One tries to live in the present moment, but terrifying visions of the future, like the fact that “the city would soon be underwater,” intrude and stain the day. And of course, as the two characters enjoy their temporally confusing ice cream from “the future of the past,” the narrator cannot help but observe that the weather is, as always, “unseasonably warm.”

“Another Historic Storm Had Failed to Arrive”

While Lerner places much of *10:04* on the moments of quiet anxiety between storms, he also narrates the experience of living through Hurricanes Irene and Sandy in New York City; the novel is bookended by the two “once in a lifetime” storms that hit just over a year apart. By including accounts of hurricane survival—especially one like Sandy, which may have been strengthened by climate change and which New

York storm-surge models had long predicted—Lerner seems to be answering Ghosh’s call for literary novelists to include “improbable” weather events in their fiction (about two years before Ghosh made the call). Ghosh claims that novelists avoid spectacular storms because spectacle doesn’t sit well with the staid bourgeois novel; rather than reintroduce spectacle to literary fiction, Lerner circumvents this problem by making the hurricanes as unspectacular as possible. Like the simmering climate anxiety that Lerner includes in moments of calm weather, his representations of the storms, as viewed from the periphery of the damage, demonstrate the contradictions of living in chronic crisis. The narrator’s muscles do not have to grapple against a literal storm surge, falling tree, or flight from a flooded home, but he tenses them all the same, grappling with the knowledge that the rare storm destroying a piece of his city is not rare at all.

As Elizabeth Rush notes in a recent interview about her selections for a climate fiction syllabus, the storms themselves, in Lerner’s accounts, disturb the narrator less than the preparations for the storms, the fear of them, and the surprise afterward that the experience of the storm by the many could not live up to the devastation it caused for a relatively small population. Rush admires Lerner’s “refusal to make Hurricanes Irene and Sandy dramatic. Instead, the drama . . . is almost all internalized.”⁴⁰ This is how Lerner describes the lead-up to the first hurricane, Irene, which would make landfall in Brooklyn on August 27, 2011: “An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York. The mayor took unprecedented steps: he divided the city into zones and mandated evacuations from the lower-lying ones; he announced the subway system would shut down before the storm made landfall; parts of lower Manhattan might be taken off the grid.”⁴¹ This is the language of history in the making: The mayor’s precautions are “unprecedented,” suggesting the spectacle of a storm bigger than New York has ever experienced. The evacuations are “mandated,” and transportation and power are “shut down.” The city prepares to sever itself from the trappings of modernity even before the storm has a chance to do it first. Ben and his friend Alex stock up on food, fill every available container with water, and decide, against habit, to have a sleepover at her apartment in case the city really suffers. They hunker down, and Ben considers a window he is “worried might soon be shattered by flying debris.” He begins to “worry about the Indian Point reactors just up-

river.”⁴² Worry is the overwhelming emotion, the body preparing itself for the worst, just as the city steels its subway and power grid. The two characters fall asleep despite the worry, and by the time Ben wakes up, “it wasn’t even raining hard. The yellow of the streetlamps revealed a familiar scene; a few branches had fallen, but no trees . . . there was disappointment in my relief at the failure of the storm.”⁴³ All the draconian preparations for the storm—and all the prodigious worrying—turn out, in this instance, to be for naught. The narrator’s honest admission of “disappointment” tingeing his “relief” is an emotional reaction to living in chronic crisis—when we worry ourselves into a frenzy of heightened adrenaline, we need a way to expend that energy. Acute crisis provides an outlet, the grappling of the muscles; chronic crisis leaves us unsure of what to do with our tensed bodies.

The episode repeats when Hurricane Sandy is impending, over a year later, near the end of the novel: “Again we did the things one does: filled every suitable container we could find with water, unplugged various appliances, located some batteries for the radio and flashlights, drew the bath. Then we got into bed and projected *Back to the Future* onto the wall; it could be our tradition for once-in-a-generation weather.”⁴⁴ The joke is that the “once-in-a-generation weather” has, in the Anthropocene, become an annual tradition. The aspect of nature that was once spectacular has become quotidian; the acute crisis has become chronic. The high tension the characters experience before Irene has transformed, here, into a sort of low-grade, semi-ironic background hum—the half-clenched muscle of chronic crisis. Again, Ben sleeps through the worst of the hurricane and, when he awakens, uses almost identical language to describe the scene outside: “When I woke, I walked to the window; it was still *raining hard*, but the *yellow of the streetlamps revealed a mundane scene; a few large branches had fallen, but no trees*. We never lost power. Another historic storm had *failed* to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time.”⁴⁵ The emphasis I’ve placed in this quote highlights the phrases that Lerner repeats from the post-Irene passage above. There are a few changes indicating that a slightly stronger storm has hit: now it is “raining hard” and the fallen branches are “large.” But the repetition is almost complete. The cozy “familiar” is even replaced by a bored “mundane,” and the reminder that they “didn’t lose power” is redundant, given that the streetlamps work. This technique of repeating

sentences nearly verbatim speaks to Lerner's background as a poet; he incorporates cyclicity and rhythm in a genre usually dominated by forward-moving narrative. In fact, the repetition of the storms jolts the narrator out of the one-directional narrative of "history," so that he is "falling out of time." In the Anthropocene, history repeats itself so often that it is no longer historical but cyclical, or chronic.

Unlike Irene, however, Sandy inflicted massive damage on New York City, and after describing the ordinariness of his Park Slope view, the narrator acknowledges with awe the difference between his experience and those of his neighbors at slightly lower elevations:

Except it had arrived, just not for us. Subway and traffic tunnels in lower Manhattan had filled with water, drowning who knows how many rats; I couldn't help imagining their screams. Power and water were knocked out below Thirty-ninth Street and in Red Hook, Coney Island, the Rockaways, much of Staten Island. Hospitals were being evacuated after backup generators failed; newborn babies and patients recovering from heart surgery were carried gingerly down flights of stairs and placed in ambulances that rushed them uptown, where the storm had never happened.⁴⁶

Sandy turned into an acute crisis for large swaths of New York and the Eastern Seaboard, inflicting casualties and destroying buildings and infrastructure. Just as shocking as the damage is the unevenness of its distribution—that the storm shattered the lives of some while barely touching others in the same zip code, for whom "the storm had never happened." Ghosh asks novelists to represent the perspectives of those whose lives are destroyed by storms, as he does in *The Hungry Tide*, a novel in which two central characters get caught in an epic typhoon.⁴⁷ That type of acute disaster experience, of course, deserves robust representation in fiction and across all genres and forms. So too, though, does the experience of people who "talked constantly about the urgency of the situation, but were still unable to feel it," as Ben does with his nonflooded neighbors after Hurricane Sandy, or people who watched "the coverage of the storm we kept failing to experience."⁴⁸

Why narrate the bystander perspective? The uneven distribution of suffering that Sandy wrought on New York is a microcosm of how climate change is affecting people around the planet. At any given moment, one region or country or population might suffer acutely, while

the rest of the world looks on aghast. Because the poor and powerless are affected first and worst, we need better representation of acute suffering in fiction, media, scholarship, and politics. But we must also develop aesthetics for representing the anxiety of chronic crisis; for every *individual* disaster associated with the long crisis of climate change, the vast majority of people around the world will fit into the category of helpless onlooker who cannot truly understand, experience, or feel what is happening despite an onslaught of information. These onlookers must be prepared to help the people under immediate threat.

Ghosh claims that one of the problems with modern novels is that they have neglected to represent the experience of “men in the aggregate,” but novels need to represent distinct, individual experiences of climate change, because people do not experience the symptoms of climate change collectively or evenly. Chronic crisis feels different for everyone and much worse for those living in flood zones, in areas of increasing drought and fire, in poverty, and in states that mistreat them and for those who otherwise lack the resources either to bail themselves out of crisis in situ or to migrate successfully to a location that will stay safe as the Anthropocene progresses. One way to render multiple individual experiences legible is to put people with different lives in direct conversation with each other. In *10:04* the nervous energy of Irene preparations unites disparate New York populations. The narrator states, “Because every conversation you overheard in line or on the street or train began to share a theme, it was soon one common conversation you could join, removing the conventional partitions from social space; riding the N train to Whole Foods in Union Square, I found myself swapping surge level predictions with a Hasidic Jew and a West Indian nurse in purple scrubs.”⁴⁹ Though it would be facile to suggest that climate change might serve as a unifying panacea when it actually exacerbates racial and class inequality, the idea that climate change might create a “common conversation” among people of different backgrounds answers Ghosh’s call for climate novels that address “men in the aggregate” rather than record the individual moral adventures of a single person. New York is unusual in its propensity to collect three people with radically different identity markers in such a confined, intimate space as the subway, suitable for a common conversation. Thinking outside the city, perhaps fiction—not a single novel but contemporary literature as a whole—might serve as the base

of a common, global conversation about climate change. No one novel would bear the burden of representing our chronic crisis for “men in the aggregate,” but a collection of works coming from many geographical and class perspectives could allow global readers to access accounts of how others are experiencing the crisis of climate change in their own lives, places, and situations.

In the final pages of *10:04*, Ben and Alex experience the unevenness of climate crisis firsthand as they attempt to travel from their unscathed neighborhood in Brooklyn to an equally intact portion of Manhattan for a doctor appointment, the problem being that they must traverse storm-devastated Lower Manhattan to get there. The journey out, by cab, is seamless, but on the way back, the characters cannot figure out how to use public transit in the altered city. They end up walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, with its view of the half-darkened city; this act causes the narrator’s thoughts to turn to Walt Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” though he does not name it in *10:04*.⁵⁰ In the poem, Whitman writes himself into communion with all the generations of people who ever have, or ever will, cross the East River into Brooklyn—he imagines himself as part of a collective humanity. Lerner quotes Whitman’s line, “I am with you,” in the last line of his novel:

Sitting at a small table looking through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue, I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I’d seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it’s hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is.⁵¹

Throughout *10:04* Lerner conforms to Ghosh’s gloss on the primacy of the perspective of a single individual in the contemporary literary novel. Here, though, after viewing the wreckage of a storm probably strengthened by climate change, Lerner explicitly addresses his narrator’s desire to connect with an audience broader than himself through language—to see the world in the “second person plural,” the “you all” that English famously lacks. This method of representing climate consciousness is hardly the only or best method available to the novel, but it is an important contribution. Lerner evinces at once a desire to extend himself into the “common conversation,” to address “men in the

aggregate,” but he also acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining this posture. The narrative always wants to slip into the third person: he did this, he did that. In our partitioned modern world, it takes great effort or a great crisis to convince us that we ought to talk to each other.

The obvious problem with using Lerner’s *10:04* to demonstrate how climate change acts as a chronic crisis is that Lerner and his avatar narrator, compared to all the people in the world, has relatively little to lose in the Anthropocene. Should Brooklyn flood, he would have the resources to move; should the number of hundred-degree days triple, he would be able to afford more air-conditioning. This is not the case for billions of people living in true climate precarity; our own wealthy country is not an exception, as we saw when poor, Black, and otherwise-vulnerable populations suffered after Hurricane Katrina. It is also not the case for the people who have already experienced the end of the world, as per Kyle Powys Whyte. So to Ghosh’s call for more non-speculative literary fiction that tackles climate change head on, I will add my own call for more fiction that tells the story of chronic crisis from the perspective of those already truly living in it—the stories of those whose muscles are already truly grappling and will be for as long as they live.

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NOTES

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.
2. Coined by Paul Crutzen and other scientists, the term *Anthropocene* has gained traction among geologists, as seen in a recent vote of the Anthropocene Working Group to mark the start of a new epoch in the middle of the twentieth century, when industrial

production accelerated carbon emissions dramatically and when radioactive debris from atomic blasts entered the geological record. Paul K. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter* 41, no. 17 (2000). For more on the scientific debate, see Meera Subramanian, “Anthropocene Now: Influential Panel Votes to Recognize Earth’s New Epoch,” *Nature*, May 21, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-01641-5>. Scholars of the humanities have rapidly invented correctives—Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene, or “Whatever-I-don’t-like-ocene,” as Chakrabarty deemed the phenomenon in a lecture. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Reading Latour in the Anthropocene,” (lecture, Recomposing the Humanities with Bruno Latour, New Literary History Conference, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, September 18, 2015). The scholars who have devised alternative -cenes argue that the institution they identify (e.g., capitalism) is the real culprit of the shift in our geological reality. Jason Moore, for example, argues that the exponential growth in our global society’s exploitation of natural resources, our determination to burn fossil fuels, and our tendency toward inequality are actually symptoms of capitalism, not of *ánthrōpos*, or humans, and by extension human nature. Jason Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594–630. For more on the Plantationocene and Chthulucene, see Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

3. For more reckonings with “The Climate of History,” see Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan, eds., “Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty’s ‘Four Theses,’” special issue, *RCC Perspectives*, no. 2, 2016.

4. Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 197, 198, 206.

5. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “crisis, n.,” accessed September 3, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44539?redirectedFrom=crisis&>.

6. Emily Dickinson, “‘Twas Crisis—All the length had passed,” in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Reading ed., ed. Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). Copyright 1998, 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965 by Mary L. Hampson.

7. Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

8. Henrik Vigh, “Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline,” *Ethnos* 73, no. 1 (2008): 5–24.

9. Chronic crisis should not be confused with a term like *resilience* or its slightly older cousin *adaptation*, both of which were born in ecological circles and have been adapted more broadly to encompass the idea that communities and ecosystems must change to accommodate the new climate reality in which we are already living. Adaptation is generally contrasted with mitigation, the attempt to stop the climate from changing by limiting greenhouse gas emissions; resilience might be paired with resistance to hegemonies that aggravate climate change. Chronic crisis, the lifelong moment of climate decision, includes both forms

of reaction—learning to manage the destruction already thrust on us and working to turn the climate tide.

10. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (New York: City Light Publishers, 2015).

11. Kyle Powys Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, nos. 1–2 (2018): 224–42.

12. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “chronic, adj.,” accessed September 3, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44539?redirectedFrom=chronic&>.

13. Carl Sagan, *Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence* (New York: Random House, 1977).

14. It has become common for scholars to claim that climate change requires a new frame of reference and a new set of definitions. Timothy Morton, for instance, evokes planetary warming as a primary example of a hyperobject, an entity so massive and unwieldy in time and space that it destroys the very idea of an object and defies the human capacity to comprehend its implications. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Chakrabarty, too, confesses that the problem with his call for a new million-year species history is that its scope places such a history beyond the understanding of the human mind, accustomed as we are to imagining our history as unfolding over the last five thousand years, since writing emerged to preserve it.

15. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

16. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

17. Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* addresses many questions of ecology, environment, and climate, but anthropogenic climate change is not a main driver of the novel’s plot, nor is it a central theme. Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (New York: Mariner, 2004).

18. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 16.

19. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 19; see also Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013).

20. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 26.

21. Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011).

22. Sarah Dimick, “Disordered Environmental Time: Phenology, Climate Change, and Seasonal Form in the Work of Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold,” *ISLE* 25, no. 4 (2018): 700–721.

23. Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (New York: Harper, 2012).

24. Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014).

25. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 78.

26. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 62.

27. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 7.

28. The only possible exception is the *Literary Journal*, a publication that I could not locate. It is possible that Ghosh intended to include the British publication the *Literary Review*, which reviewed Lerner’s *10:04* in the December 2014 issue.

29. Lerner, *10:04*, 3.
30. Lerner, *10:04*, 32, 63.
31. Lerner, *10:04*, 164.
32. US Climate Data, "Marfa Weather Averages," accessed September 3, 2020, <https://www.usclimatedata.com/climate/marfa/texas/united-states/ustxo83o>.
33. Lerner, *10:04*, 179–80.
34. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 68.
35. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 72.
36. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 59. A true contradiction of Ghosh's point requires a narrative that extends millions of years in time, like James Michener's *Hawaii*, which begins with the formation of the islands through volcanic activity and proceeds in workmanlike fashion through the history of the twentieth century. James A. Michener, *Hawaii* (New York: Random House, 1959).
37. Lerner, *10:04*, 143.
38. Lerner, *10:04*, 152.
39. Lerner, *10:04*, 153.
40. Lerner's *10:04* is the only novel on Rush's syllabus that minimizes, rather than emphasizes, the drama of potential apocalypse; not coincidentally, it is also the only nonspeculative novel and the only novel not set in a postdisaster future. Representation like Lerner's remains unusual. Amy Brady, "Professors, What's on Your Climate Fiction Syllabus?," *Yale Climate Connections*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2018/04/whats-on-your-climate-fiction-syllabus/>.
41. Lerner, *10:04*, 16.
42. Lerner, *10:04*, 22.
43. Lerner, *10:04*, 23–24.
44. Lerner, *10:04*, 230.
45. Lerner, *10:04*, 230, emphasis mine.
46. Lerner, *10:04*, 230–31.
47. Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*.
48. Lerner, *10:04*, 232.
49. Lerner, *10:04*, 17.
50. Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002).
51. Lerner, *10:04*, 240.